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Title : Threats to the Dugong of Okinawa, Japan

Category : Conservation

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Abstract : In Japan at present, Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) is observed only at Okinawa Island, making Okinawa Island the northernmost limit of its distribution. The status of Dugong in Okinawa is that of a local population confined to a very small area of distribution, isolated from other populations, very few in number, and very much in danger of extinction. Okinawa's Dugong is one of the critically endangered species and natural monument in Japan. One of the serious problems complicating conservation of Okinawa's Dugong is a plan to construct a military air base for use by the United States Marines Corps to replace Futenma air base, also on Okinawa Island. In 2002, the Government of Japan and Okinawa Prefecture made a decision of the basic plan to landfill a coral reef and seagrass area about 1 kilometer offshore of Henoko, Nago City and construct a 2,500 meter long, 730 meter wide military air base on top of the landfill. The decided construction site for this military air base is located in the central portion of the Dugong's habitat in Okinawa Island. It would not only bisect the habitat, but would also destroy seagrass beds that function as important feeding grounds, coral reefs that serve as resting sites, and canals between both site for the Dugong. Another serious problem is incidental bycatch. Corpses of Dugong that appear to have been caught in fishing nets occasionally wash ashore. In the 1980s there were four corpses, nine in the 1990s and three in 2000. Red soil runoff from the land is also damaging the seagrass beds and the coral reef environment. Therefore appropriate and urgent prevention measures are required for the survival of Okinawa's Dugong. We are continuing conservation activities such as public awareness, signature campaign, lobbying for the Diet and the government, symposium with scientists, and others based on the action plan for the conservation of Dugong in Okinawa.